



# Eight Mile Mesa Fuels Reduction Project<sup>v.2020-10-30</sup>



## Decision Memo

Eight Mile Mesa Fuels Reduction Project

U.S. Forest Service

Pagosa Ranger District, San Juan National Forest

Archuleta County, Colorado

### Project Information

**Proposal Name:** Eight Mile Mesa Fuels Reduction Project

**Proposal Date:** July 2021

**USFS Project Contact:** Fred Ellis

**Proponent:** N/A

**Responsible Official:** Josh Peck District Ranger

**Unit:** San Juan National Forest

**Ranger District:** Pagosa Ranger District

**Counties:** Archuleta

**State:** CO

**Anticipated Implementation:** Fall of 2022

**Signing Authority:** District Ranger

**Public web link:** <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=60411>

**General Location:** Eight Mile Mesa

**Applicable Management Areas:** Management Area 3 Natural Landscape with Limited Management

**Legal Description:** T.34N, R.2W, Sections 24, 025, 36, T.34N, R.1.5W, Sections 24,25, T.34N, R.1W, Sections 16, 19, 20, 21, 29, 30

**Elevation Range:** approximately 7700 ft-8100 ft

**Watersheds:** Rio Blanco

### Applicable Categorical Exclusion and Findings Required by Other Laws

This proposal is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement because it fits the following category or categories, considering extraordinary circumstance determinations:

#### Applicable Category or Categories:

36 CFR 220.6(e)(6) (DM Required) Timber/WL Habitat Improvement

This category is applicable for this project because treatments are designed to improve big game habitat for deer and elk.



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## Proposed Action

**Project Purpose and Proposal:** The purpose of this project is to:

- **reduce hazardous fuels** to manage natural wildfire ignitions, facilitate prescribed fires, protect private residences and structures and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire
- **improve forest health** by reducing competition for water and nutrients.
- **improve elk and mule deer foraging habitat** through increased sprouting of Gambel oak and other mountain shrub species in an important migration corridor and directly adjacent to winter concentration habitat for these species.

This will be accomplished through mowing and shredding of shrubs and smaller diameter trees and/or felling of smaller diameter trees. The project area was mechanically treated in 2005 and has experienced significant regrowth of shrub species. The shrub layer covers approximately 60% of the project area and ranges in height from 4 feet to over 10 feet tall, with an average height of approximately 8 feet. Most of the ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, white fir and juniper were masticated or thinned in the original treatment.

**Project Area:** The project area consists of approximately 1,052 acres of National Forest Service land on the Pagosa Ranger District in Archuleta County, CO. Units 3-6 are on the mesa top. Units 1 and 2 are adjacent to forest road 651, leading to the mesa. The project area falls within Management Theme 3 – Natural Landscapes with Limited Management. The San Juan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan released in September 2013 allows for the use of mechanical equipment and prescribed fire in this management area. The project area falls within the Wildland-Urban Interface. The forest in the project area consists of ponderosa pine, Gambel oak and associated shrubs, warm dry mixed-conifer, mountain shrubs and pinyon-juniper. The shrubs range in height from 4 ft. to over 10 ft.

Treatment Block	Acres*	Treatment
U1	20	Thin
U2	50	Mow/Thin
U3	165	Mow/Thin
U4	148	Mow/Thin
U4A	119	Mow/Thin
U5	348	Mow/Thin
U6	245	Mow/Thin
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,095</b>	

**Proposed Treatment:** The proposed treatment consists of mechanical mowing and shredding of shrubs, small diameter (<12" DBH) ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, white fir, and juniper in blocks 2, 3, 4, 4A, 5 and 6. Some areas within the mow blocks may be thinned and the boles removed as fuelwood. Mowing/thinning may be followed by prescribed burning in some areas. Hand thinning and piling of slash would occur in block 1. Treatment blocks are shown on the attached map. Design elements associated with the proposed treatment are listed below.

**Management History:** There is evidence that logging occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Blocks 2-6, with the exception of Block 4A, were masticated in 2005. Some hand thinning occurred post-mastication. A 212-acre prescribed fire was conducted on the mesa in 1975. There are no active grazing allotments in the project area. There have been dozens of recorded





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wildfires on the mesa with most less than 1 acre in size. The largest recorded fire was 10 acres in 1988.

**Access:** From Pagosa Springs: travel south on Highway 84 approximately 5 miles. Turn right onto Eight Mile Mesa Road (an Archuleta County road). This road turns into Forest Service Road 651. Enter Mow Block 3 in approximately 2 miles. All other blocks are located off this road.

### **Treatment Objectives:**

1. Reduce and/or rearrange understory fuels to have an immediate effect on potential fire behavior.
2. Reduce the risk of wildfire to the public, private property and structures.
3. Provide firefighter safety.
4. Improve forest health by reducing crown density and competition for nutrients and water.
5. Improve wildlife habitat through increased sprouting of shrub species.

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### **Design Elements**

The following design elements are incorporated into the proposed action to ensure land management plan compliance:

1. Pre-settlement ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir will not be removed unless necessary for safety.
2. Gambel oak greater than 6 inches DRC will be protected and retained as much as possible.
3. Shrubs and small trees will be mowed in a manner to create and/or maintain clumps and decrease crown continuity.
4. Masticated material will be dispersed to greatest extent possible to avoid creating jackpots.
5. All riparian areas and wetlands will be avoided by equipment, except at crossings designated by the Forest Service.
6. Equipment will not be allowed to operate off roads when soils are saturated such that ruts 4 inches deep and at least 10 feet long are created.
7. Mowing should promote 2-aged or multiple-aged conifer stands and retain an average of approximately 50 to 100 trees per acre of ponderosa pine seedlings and saplings <5" DBH and an average overall stocking between approximately 50 to 80 square feet of basal area per acre.
8. Snags greater than 12 inches in diameter will be protected to the extent practical during mastication/mowing/thinning operations to provide habitat for species that utilize snags for roosting (fringed myotis), nesting (flamulated owl and Lewis' woodpecker) and perching (northern goshawk and olive-sided flycatcher).
9. A wildlife biologist shall be notified immediately if raptor nests are discovered. If raptor nests are discovered measures will be applied to minimize disturbance impacts to breeding raptors.
10. Survey and NHPA Section 106 consultation will be completed with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) regarding potential effects to historic properties in proposed treatment units under the terms of the 2017 programmatic agreement with Colorado SHPO.
11. In the event that unidentified archaeological resources are discovered in the course of the project, a San Juan National Forest Archaeologist shall be notified immediately. All work will



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stop in the immediate area until the resource has been evaluated in terms of National Register of Historic Places eligibility criteria (36 CFR 60.4).

### Agencies, Organizations and Persons Contacted

A list of **Error! Reference source not found.** regarding this proposal is provided in the project file. The project was also listed in the SOPA in July 2021; no comments were received.

### Implementation Date

I intend to implement the decision immediately upon the signature of the Decision Memo

### Administrative Review

Decisions that are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement are not subject to an administrative review process (Agriculture Act of 2014 [Pub. L. No. 113-79], Subtitle A, Sec. 8006).

### Contact

Fred Ellis Assistant Fire Management Officer (Fuels)  
180 Pagosa Street  
Pagosa Springs, CO 81147  
[fred.ellis@usda.gov](mailto:fred.ellis@usda.gov)  
970-264-1541

### Decision

This decision incorporates all information in this document and included in the project file.

### I have decided to authorize the activities described in the "Applicable Categorical Exclusion and Findings Required by Other Laws

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Proposed Action" section, including any modifications that resulted from environmental analysis and review of regulatory compliance.



Joshua P. Peck  
District Ranger

8-9-2021

Date

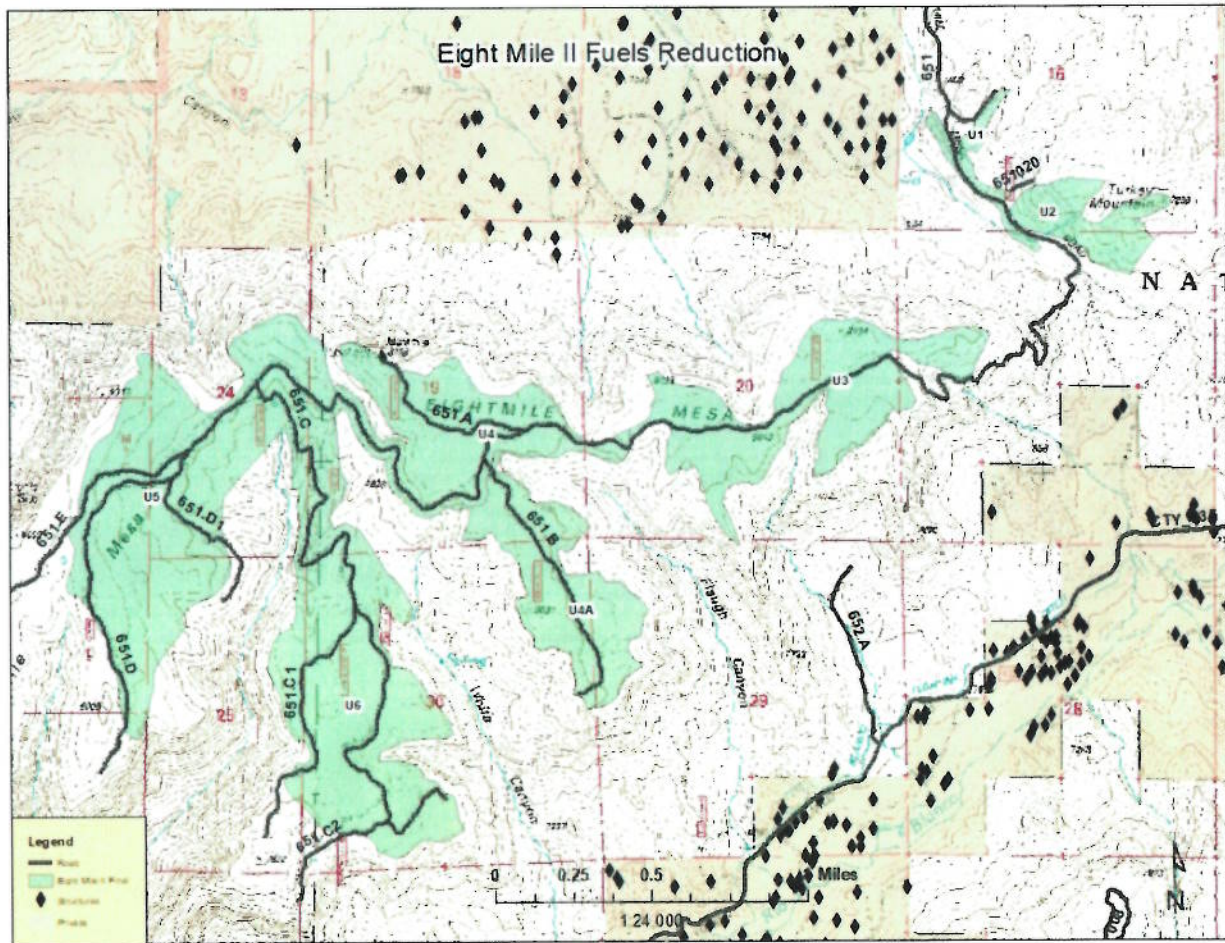
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## Project Map







## Extraordinary Circumstance Determinations

Pertinent specialists have reviewed the proposal and made the following determinations with regards to degree of effects for the resource conditions considered:

### Resource conditions considered for extraordinary circumstance determinations

Resource Conditions Considered for Extraordinary Circumstances	Is there a degree of potential effect that raises uncertainty over its significance? Briefly explain.
Federally listed threatened or endangered species, designated critical habitat, and Forest Service sensitive species	<p>Botany: NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: No effects to TES plant species anticipated and no adverse effects to designated critical habitat anticipated. Some individual sensitive plant species and habitat may be impacted, however based on the small scope, scale and duration of disturbances associated with this project, effects to species are expected to be minimal.</p>
	<p>Fisheries: NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: No TES fish species or habitat is present in the project area</p>
	<p>Wildlife: NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: Some individual sensitive wildlife species may be impacted, however based on the small scope, scale and duration of disturbances associated with this project, effects to species are expected to be negligible. No TE or candidate fish and wildlife species or habitat are present in the project area. There are seven sensitive species that have habitat in the project area.</p>
Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds	<p>NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: No adverse impacts to wetlands, floodplains, or municipal watersheds are anticipated. Project is in compliance with SJNF Forest Plan and applicable laws and regulations.</p>
Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas	<p>N/A, not present Rationale: <a href="#">Type here</a></p>
Inventoried roadless areas	<p>N/A, not present Rationale: <a href="#">Type here</a></p>
Research natural areas	<p>N/A, not present Rationale: <a href="#">Type here</a></p>
American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites	<p>N/A, not present Rationale: <a href="#">Type here</a></p>



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Resource Conditions Considered for Extraordinary Circumstances	Is there a degree of potential effect that raises uncertainty over its significance? Briefly explain.
Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas	NO, there is no uncertainty Rationale: Previous survey and SHPO consultation resulted in formal determination that cultural resources located in the APE are not eligible for NRHP. Therefore will be no effect to cultural resources